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## Literary practice as a way to promote resilience

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### Abstract

The birth and building of resilience as a concept and scientific paradigm are strongly linked to Literature. The author analyzes the possible contributions that the development of literary competence can provide to fostering the resilience of individuals at any age or biographic situation and makes a concrete proposal of educational application of her method of developing such competence both in formal educational contexts (compulsory and post compulsory ones) as in the so called lifelong learning.

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**Keywords:** Resilience; Literary competence; Life skills; Lifelong learning

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### 1. Introduction

Since its inception, the model underlying the concept of resilience has strong links with literary manifestations, mainly narrative ones. The main sources of reflection of the thinkers who have shaped the basic concepts of this paradigm on human resistance to adversity rely more on case studies than in experimental data or quantitative research. Such references often come from autobiographical testimonies of people who have overcome misfortune (Jollien, 2001; Guénard, 2010) or from literary narratives (tales, novels, biographies) that because of their strength and prototypical character provide clarifying data about the potential of people to recover from a serious trauma. A. Gianfrancesco (2010) introduces the concept of “resilience literature” referring to a heterogeneous set of creations (Perrault tales and the tales of the Brothers Grimm, *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, etc.) with an outline almost prototypical in line with the proposals of V. Propp and B. Bettelheim.

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These stories are very enlightening to understand the process of rebirth experienced by some persons (to some extent presented as heroes or at least as moral examples) after a deep vital wound.

Other researchers of resilience as A. Dessetta and S. Wolin (1998) emphasize the healing power of writing to the extent that allows the redefinition of one's own biography, as highlights the narrative psychotherapy: "A principle technique of this school is reframing, opening up hidden themes that have been frozen shut in memory. This theory of therapeutic change holds that by recognizing previously unseen elements of their struggles, clients will reinterpret themselves, construct a new life story that will be the basis for living well in the present and regarding the future with greater optimism". In *Project Resilience*, lead by Stephen and Sybil Wolin, this therapeutic function moves outside of the clinical context coordinated by the psychotherapist to become a magazine, *Youth Communication*, which hosts the writings of teenagers where they reflect their own experiences besides the aspiration to achieve certain aesthetic quality which logically implies to know, assimilate and develop the resources of the written verbal code.

Beyond the therapeutic power of artistic experience in general (Martínez Díez & López Fernández, 2004), it is known that the incorporation of any artistic discipline has a profound impact on the personal development of students and their academic performance. It has been found that the arts (Fiske, 2002): a) improve the relationship of students to themselves and others, b) increase the motivation to learn any subject, c) enrich the school environment, d) facilitate the connection between the student and teacher e) enhance emotional balance and self-control (Reyzábal, 1999). These aspects have been extensively tested with music, theater or even paint, but there is not much research on vital and pedagogical repercussion of Literature (Reyzábal, 2002a, 2002b; Rico Carballo, 2004). In relation with these questions, I intend to expose a theoretical and practical methodology to acquire reading and writing skills. In my opinion, progress in this direction raises as a privileged way of development of the so current "life skills" (World Health Organization, 1993) and, consequently, to promote resilience.

## 2. Method

It is performed a qualitative review of the theoretical and practical activities carried out by the author from the mid eighties to the present aimed at implementing comprehension and production of various literary discourses. The recipients of these projects have been diverse in various aspects: age, educational and cultural background, biographic and emotional status... The participants were teachers of various academic levels, students of all stages of compulsory and post compulsory education, learners with high capacities, pupils of centers of adult education, persons of multicultural and multiethnic groups, prison population, women with severe chronic diseases, chronic psychiatric patients treated in long-term hospitals... In every case it was conducted an initial assessment that explored two distinct areas. On one hand, items related to the life situation and psychosocial characteristics of participants: mood state, capacity to identify one's emotions, self-concept and perception about own abilities and strategies to face adverse situations, the inclination to solidarity and cooperative work with other people and available social supports. Furthermore, it was considered their situation in terms of knowledge and mastery of compressive and expressive verbal skills as well as their attitude to Literature.

## 3. Results

The initial attitude of any group that faces a participatory approach to literary production (both as a reader like a producer of texts) is often defensive and even hostile. Typically, the predominant notion is that literary production is only possible if exists a magical, intangible force called "inspiration" (Reyzábal, 2009). To overcome the initial reluctances and first blockades is essential a proper planning (i.e. a sufficiently meditated and cyclically revised design that fits the characteristics of the target group) and a good temporalization of: a) the competences that are to be developed, b) the objectives that are to be achieved and, c) the contents that are planned to be transmitted. Equally important is the design of varied activities with well defined goals. The involvement of the participants will be even more successful if the responsible of the class or workshop becomes another participant besides to coordinate and streamline the functioning of the group.

The choice of exemplary texts that serve as a starting model is another key element. The teacher or coordinator of the activity must seek written pieces with varying complexity and also various subjects and to be precise in the graduation of formal complexity of the chosen resources (Reyzábal, 2002a). The possibilities offered by the existing rich body of artistic written creations in both Spanish and Universal literary heritage makes possible to select samples that are an endless source of reflections on topics as diverse as the appreciation of the differences between humans beings (Querol & Reyzábal, 2008), the demonstration of the rich although often denied creative and experiential capacity of women (Reyzábal, 2002d, 2003, 2012), the knowledge and appreciation of the richness of other cultures different from ours (Reyzábal, 2008) and the expression of own experiences and emotions (Reyzábal, 2002b, 2002c, 2009).

Starting from the selected texts, the coordinator of the activity will begin with his traveling companions a decoding task as comprehensive as possible, to convey to the readers more or less neophytes the extraordinary richness enclosing even the simplest composition: a) their key themes and their connection with the biography of who wrote it, the relation with its historical moment and its relevance in the present, b) the sonorous and rhythmic richness present in it and what happens when it's read for oneself or for an audience, c) the stylistic characteristics and how would change the whole if some aspects are modified (gender of the characters, type of protagonist, the lexical register used ...), d) the feelings, thoughts or responses to it and the way in which we can capture them (an essay, a poem, a story, a parody, a story, a collage, a song...).

The capacity of the workshop coordinator for provide basic information (mainly conceptual contents and an introduction to certain work procedures) in order to carry out the reconstruction of the literary piece and for suggest what additional research could enhance the level of understanding of it (further readings, bibliographic reviews, interviews with people who may be connected to the subject in question or that have researched about it, the writing of different compositions that reinterpret some aspect of the text...) will help to increase the resources to enjoy the reading of literary pieces and to advance to make their own creations. These ones will no longer be conceived as the result of a "bright idea" or a special talent, but a thoughtful and thorough work that can be extremely satisfying, beyond clarifications or corrections made by the coordinator, by peers or by themselves as authors that want to review again and again what they have written, understanding that literary writing is a process of continuous reformulation more than a brilliant product of a "moment of ecstasy".

The literary expression offers the enormous advantage to accommodate any issue linked to the concerns and desires of human beings. In that sense it is a cross-cutting activity that offers insights into any subject matter of learning (Tenorio & Reyzábal, 1994; Reyzábal & Sanz, 2002): from politics to science through sociology, psychology, architecture, painting... or any other discipline that comes to mind. But above all, while we enjoy, understand or produce narrative, poetry, essays or dramatic pieces we come in contact with our inner world while we project ourselves into the subjectivity of others with the goal of interpret, understand or reformulate it. At the same time, the task that is performed in group permits to combine individual activity with the cognitive and emotional exchange with others in multiple ways through: a) the analysis of texts in discussion or research groups, b) recreational activities of collective production, c) forums in which we read to others our or their productions or the creations of other writers, adding the effort to deep into the communicative intention of the author, d) creating assemblies to exercise constructive criticism about the productions made by its members, e) encouraging the gestation of self-help groups to address a particularly rewarding aspect for many writers that is the publishing (in newsletters, printed magazines or some of the many forums that provide new technologies of communication) and dissemination of their writings. This latest aspect can be in form of purely literary formats or in form of mixed productions (Durañona, MA. et al., 2006) that integrate audiovisual elements.

What do we reach with all this strategy of intervention? It would probably be sufficient if we could collect a decent collection of tales, sonnets or short novels, but, yet, that goal could be considered a pretext for a much deeper achievement. The methodology of action exposed so far fosters activation of extremely powerful processes of individual and collective growth which have much to contribute to the strengthening of the resilience of the participants. This fact is easily demonstrated if we link this proposal with the model developed by Henderson and Milstein (2003), commonly known as the "wheel of resilience", as a guide to transform schools in the way that propose the resilience paradigm.

### 3.1. *Enrich the linkages*

Although literary activity can be considered in principle as essentially individual and isolated, the type of work done in these workshops pays more attention to collective tasks than to the achievements of each member, avoiding competitiveness. Moreover, while the group grows assumes as its own the progress of each member and celebrates -more than achieve the best metaphor or the best structured narrative components- the overcoming of inhibitions of the members more reticent and especially appreciates the first steps of the ones that need more time to participate or the improvements made by each member in the successive corrections of their productions. The assessments conducted during and after the workshop show that productions achieved as a result of the collective contributions are considered more valuable than individual products. Going further, immersion in the proposed texts as models supports the building of a peculiar link which allows establishing reactions of sympathy, admiration or identification with authors faraway in time or space but strikingly nearby through the magic that involves the updating of his writings in the here and now. Obviously, it is much more immediate the connection that can be established between group mates by sharing cognitively and emotionally what they are reading or writing.

### 3.2. *Set clear and firm boundaries*

Achievements in the best use of the verbal code have an immediate impact on the establishment of precise behavioral limits, given the self-regulatory effects that are typical of this expressive code in their oral or written concretions. Verbal expressions of literary nature involve even more demanding nuances, since the increased complexity of the rules that govern them leads to a deep involvement of the decoder/producer of literary discourses on the knowledge, the respect and the appreciation of the guidelines governing the activity they are learning and improving. It is a paradoxical dynamic, as the literary verbal code, which is regulated by accurate guidelines (phonological, semantic, textual...), allows and promotes the breakdown of the same if such "rebellion" entails the search for aesthetic achievements and not simply the manifestation of unawareness of the code or lack of concern for the accuracy, the precision, or the aesthetic of the message that want be verbally expressed.

### 3.3. *To teach (to learn) skills for life*

The improvement in literary competence involves essential contributions in the field of each of the ten life skills referred by the World Health Organization, which in turn are closely interrelated with the characteristic features of a resilient self (Table 1).

#### 3.3.1. *Social Skills*

*Knowledge of oneself:* Stand in front of the blank paper to translate verbally a beautiful literary text compels us to look back inside to find the keys to our experience and our behavior. As we write, either in first person, and either by assuming the identity of other voices we express what we are, making it aware when we improve our production or reread it to ourselves or to others. Because as T. S. Eliot indicated (1992, 16-17): "expressing what the others feel also changes the feeling, because it shows it more conscious; allows people to take ownership of what they felt, and therefore teaches them something about themselves."

*Empathy:* When any written work is read and discussed we learn to get into the behavior and subjectivity of the others, both into the characters that integrate that fiction as into the mind that once gave them life. Recently, it has been detected that this process modifies in some way the activity of certain areas of the brain and induces changes that persists for several days (Berns, Blaine, Prietula & Pye, 2003). The process deepens when, as authors, we leave the first person and adopt the point of view of a third person or persons, especially when it is very different from us (in sexual identity, cultural background, social status, etc...).

*Assertive Communication:* Advancing in the understanding and production of literary texts involves, above all, improve the ability to transmit verbally with accuracy, correction and relevance thoughts, opinions, desires, and fantasies to the diverse "others" with which we can interact at different times in our lives. The various

communicative situations in which the literary texts place us allow us developing the capacity to adapt with flexibility and versatility our way of expressing ourselves according to the context and characteristics of the receptors, thereby ensuring that the communicative act takes place with the maximum efficiency and richness as possible.

*Interpersonal Relationships:* Improve the expressive capacities is one of the decisive links to achieve narrow positive human interactions. The clearer and smoother is the expression of our intentions and better integrates the linguistic and nonverbal messages better is the quality of the bond we have with others.

Table 1 (Mantilla, 2001, 13)

Profile of a resilient person	Life skills involved
Control of emotions and impulses	Ability to solve problems and conflicts Critical thinking Management of feelings and emotions
Autonomy	Knowledge of oneself Interpersonal relationships Capacity to make decisions Critical thinking
High self-esteem	Knowledge of oneself Interpersonal relationships Empathy
Empathy	Empathy Assertive Communication
Ability to understand and analyze situations	Ability to solve problems and conflicts Critical thinking
Cognitive capacity	Critical thinking Creative thinking
Capacity of attention and concentration	None of the psychosocial skills focuses specifically in these areas. The participation in life skills workshops can contribute indirectly to the development of both traits. The sessions should be enjoyable and fun and are a suitable play space for developing a sense of humor.
Sense of humor	
Sense of purpose and future	Knowledge of oneself Capacity to make decisions Critical thinking Creative thinking

### 3.3.2. Cognitive Skills

*Capacity to make decisions:* The dual role of decoding and/or producing literary texts involves learning to pose questions and in turn the implementation of deductive and inductive processes aimed at deepening the started task. In the beginning, both the questions and suggestions about how to resolve the questions are guided by a teacher or coordinating expert on the subject, but the ultimate goal is that the individual himself makes the comment of a given text or creates an autonomous production.

*Ability to solve problems and conflicts:* Every story or lyrical composition involves a depiction of life situations that place the issuer at a crossroads. Love experiences, emotional losses, existential or ethical dilemmas, struggle with the routine... The tasting of literary creations or literary expression raises potential questions and pushes to consider the answers provided by protagonists of fiction as alternative responses to uncertainty.

*Critical thinking:* Literature is primarily questioner, does not resign itself to admit that any human issue admits a unique approach, and therefore forces a continuous search of the how and whys of each situation, almost always

to conclude that another form of alternate reality is possible in terms of justice and humanity (Reyzábal, 2002b). This is the message that an increasingly formed reader can trace in such different authors as Cervantes, Shakespeare, Woolf, García Lorca, Borges, Cortázar and many others. And that is the lesson they transmit to who is encouraged to create dramatic, novelistic or poetic texts: never settle for what is given, always go further, looking for something new and better for individuals and for the whole Humanity.

*Creative thinking:* If there is a creative variant of the verbal expression it is the literary one. The person who writes (and reads) literature seeks beauty, originality, the speech not useful but shocking for its successful combination of content and form. Any progress in the domain of literary competence deepen involve new ways of perceiving and thinking about reality and ourselves towards the establishment of cognitive and emotional connections liberated from prejudice, stereotypical ways of thinking that tend to impose the dominant social groups and that silenced the subjectivity and autonomy, and finally the ability to transform the environment and ourselves.

### 3.3.3. Emotional Skills

*Management of feelings and emotions:* The gloomier topic of the writer presents an unbalanced person, often destroyed by their ghosts, alcohol or suicide. This disastrous prototype hidden how many human beings living terrible circumstances (prolonged imprisonment, exile, severe emotional deprivations...) have overcome their suffering through the creation of more favorable worlds full of beauty, humor and meaning. The knowledge about human nature that brings the literary experience and the approach to her emotional overflows, her anguish wells and her ability to overcoming, help to understand that anxiety, insecurity, fear, but also the ecstatic feelings of pleasure or even the omnipotence ones are temporary outbursts that can (and should) be tempered and dosed and that aesthetic translation of these intense emotions is a very productive way to achieve those goals (Reyzábal, 1999).

*Management of tension and stress:* The aesthetic pleasure existing in tasting and literary expression when strategies are sufficient to make it deep enough, acts as a suitable sedative to calm internal stresses without resorting to harmful anesthetic drugs as usual today. So declares N. Goldberg (1993, 90): "If you want to get drunk do not drink whiskey; read aloud Shakespeare, Tennyson, Keats, Neruda, Hopkins, Millay, Whitman and let your body sing with them."

- *Provide support and affection.* The sources of emotional support in the context of a workshop of literary creation are multiple: a) the coordinator with his facilitator attitude and his participation, b) the peers with their attention and positive review on the progress of each participant, and c) the whole group structure, that becomes an important support to overcome initial inhibitions and strengthen the progressive steps that are achieved, as well as to encourage that the path started do not stop in the time frame of the specific activity and that the achievements translate to the daily lives of each of the participants. The written samples, landmarks that persist in translating paper or other media, are an incentive that survives the temporal fugacity which implies the concrete experience of a creative meeting.
- *Establish and communicate high expectations.* Propose a goal that many of the participants believe unattainable and supply adequate strategies to understand that this is not so, involves encouraging discovering and launching capabilities (always present even when one is not a literary genius) which oneself frequently censure. When this message is transmitted, the self-confidence grows and so does the belief in oneself's capacity to achieve goals that now become possible through a well directed and persistent work strategy.
- *Provide opportunities for meaningful participation* What greater possibility of participation that reinvent the world through writing! Access to the enjoyment of literary texts as a reader or as a writer is associated with the key to reflexively deconstruct the palpable reality and propose ways of see ourselves and the context that surrounds us completely renovated. But those that are involved in these collective literary experiences not only enjoy the possibility of reformulating their experience but of sharing what they are building. In fact, the most elaborate corollary of these workshops lies in collective productions in the form of texts produced in common or compilations of the group's compositions in various formats (murals, magazines or books).



#### 4. Conclusions

"Read to live" was the message that Flaubert sent to his audience. To this proclaim should be added many other nuances: read and write to know yourselves, transform yourselves and the world, enjoy, equilibrate your life, heal yourselves, grow and become richer as persons, to reach... so many vital goals. My experience with writing workshops widely confirms the hypothesis that underlies all my essays since I began to investigate about this subject: literary writing can be taught at any time of life and in the most diverse contexts and situations, even in the most unfavorable and extremely marginal ones. There is place for literary beauty in prisons, in the suburbs, in the asylums that yet persist...

But beyond that first intuition I would add another later conviction: by learning how to become a better reader and writer anybody can become a better person and improve his resources to deal with the inevitable hardships of life. That is the modest contribution to promote resilience of an artistic expression that requires no special places nor expensive resources or exceptional personal qualities.

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